

International Women's Day



March 8th - The Red Women's Day

A resource-book for educators

Introduction

International Women's day, founded in 1910, is the worker's women's day.

Before 1910, there was feminism, and there was the campaign for women's suffrage, meaning the vote in democratic politics. But these were movements for the gaining of equal rights within the ruling class of any particular nation, by members of the ruling class of that nation. These movements were national, and not international.

The founding and continuing basis of the international movement of women was, and still is, the international solidarity of working-class women with each other, and with the working-class men.

Before 1910 there were the First and Second Workers' Internationals. These were the real origin and source of the International Women's Day founded by Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai in Copenhagen in 1910.

Beginnings

The efforts of women of the privileged classes to acquire rights that had been gained by the males of their class, notably the right to own property and the right to vote, are called feminism. Feminism has a long history, and it continues to exist.

The origin of International Women's Day is not found in feminism, but rather in the working-class organisations that grew up in the 19th century, beginning with the founding of the First International under the leadership of Karl Marx in 1865, two years before the publication of Volume 1 of his masterpiece, "Capital".

Clara Zetkin was born in 1857. Zetkin was already active in the labour movement in 1874, in the year that Charlotte Maxeke was born. Politically active at 17, Zetkin died aged 75 in 1933, in the Soviet Union, exiled there from Germany by the Nazi fascists.



Clara Zetkin

What is now the German Social Democratic Party came together at a unity congress at Gotha, in 1875, of two earlier parties that had been founded in 1863 and 1869. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were involved. Zetkin joined it in 1878.

In 1879 the German Social Democratic leader August Bebel published his book "Women and Socialism". Of this work, Clara Zetkin later wrote:

"It was more than a book, it was an event – a great deed. The book pointed out for the first time the connection between the women's question and historical development. For the first time, there sounded from this book the appeal: We will only conquer the future if we persuade the women to become our co-fighters."

Bebel's book was not perfect, but what Clara Zetkin – the initiator of International Women's Day – points out is that it made a clear statement of the connection between women and history in general, that is to say the history of the world, of which, these socialists by this stage knew, the working class is the standard-bearer.

This combination, and not individualist bourgeois feminism, is the true source and logic of International Women's Day.

~ * ~

In 1884 another book that was a great deed and an event was published. This was "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", written by Frederick Engels, using papers left by Karl Marx on his death in 1883, based in turn on the theoretical work and original research of Henry Morgan, author of the book *Ancient Society*.

Engels' unsurpassed book describes women's place in society in the complete context of the origin of property, class struggle, and the instrument that defends property and dominates class struggle: The State. It does this in the complete context of world history. Feminism produced nothing like this work, and could not have done, for the reason that "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" prophesies the end of the class to which the feminists belong.



Frederick Engels

Engels' work was an immediate success and remains a great classic. Moreover, it is completely "international". It addresses humanity in its past, present and future.

Of the ancient homestead Engels wrote:

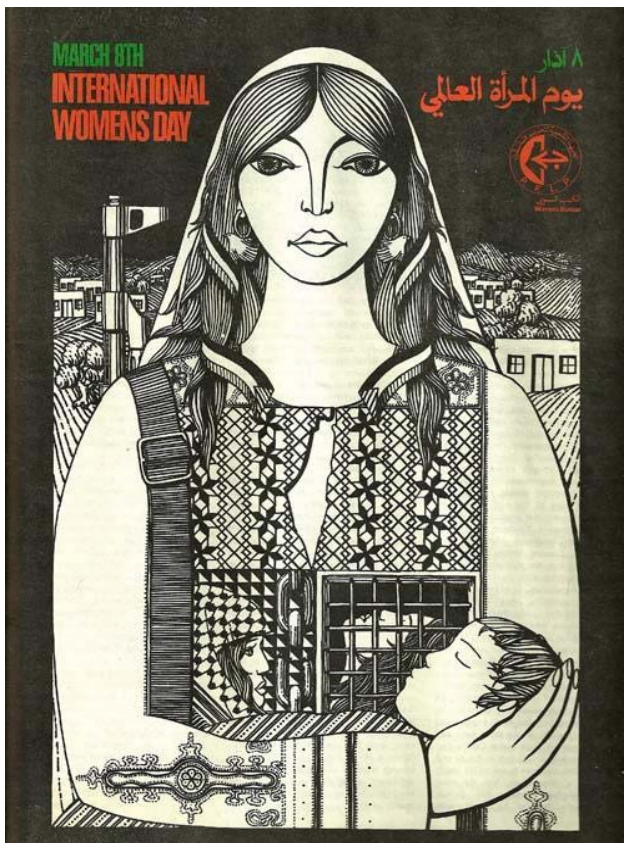
“What is made and used in common is common property - the house, the garden, the long-boat. Here therefore, and here alone, there still exists in actual fact that ‘property created by the owner's labour’ which in civilised society is an ideal fiction of the jurists and economists, the last lying legal pretence by which modern capitalist property still bolsters itself up.”

The 20th-century writer Evelyn Reed points out in her work “Woman’s Evolution”, based on Engels’ “The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State”, that all, or nearly all, of the basic technologies upon which productive progress was based, and upon which we still rely, were initiated and managed by women.

It becomes extremely clear, reading these works, that the global fall of the women to their present condition of subordination was occasioned by class forces, and that, therefore, the full, global emancipation of women will require the institution, or re-institution, of communism.

Here, again, is the conjunction of class politics and proletarian internationalism, which is the essence of International Women’s Day.

~ * ~



1981



1968



1920



1956

On 16 October 1896, at the Congress of the Social Democratic Party (equivalent to a communist party of today) Clara Zetkin made a ground-breaking speech, later published as “Only in Conjunction with the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism be Victorious”. Among other things she said:

“The granting of political equality to women does not change the actual balance of power. The proletarian woman ends up in the proletarian, the bourgeois woman in the bourgeois camp. We must not let ourselves be fooled by Socialist trends in the bourgeois women’s movement which last only as long as bourgeois women feel oppressed.”

Later in her 1896 speech Zetkin said:

“Propaganda among women is difficult and burdensome and requires great devotion and great sacrifice, but these sacrifices will be rewarded and must be brought forth. The proletariat will be able to attain its liberation only if it fights together without the difference of nationality and profession. In the same way it can attain its liberation only if it stands together without the distinction of sex. The incorporation of the great masses of proletarian women in the liberation struggle of the proletariat is one of the prerequisites for the victory of the Socialist idea and for the construction of a Socialist society.”

Zetkin, Kollontai and Luxemburg



Clara Zetkin



Alexandra Kollontai



Rosa Luxemburg

In 1909 the Russian communist Alexandra Kollontai wrote a pamphlet called “The Social Basis of the Woman Question”. In it, among other things, she said:

“However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of the contemporary economic and social structure of society without which the liberation of women cannot be complete.

“If in certain circumstances the short-term tasks of women of all classes coincide, the final aims of the two camps, which in the long term determine the direction of the movement and the tactics to be used, differ sharply. While for the feminists the achievement of equal rights with men in the framework of the contemporary capitalist world represents a sufficiently concrete end in itself, equal rights at the present time are, for the proletarian women, only a means of advancing the struggle against the economic slavery of the working class. The feminists see men as the main enemy, for men have unjustly seized all rights and privileges for themselves, leaving women only chains and duties. For them a victory is won when a prerogative previously enjoyed exclusively by the male sex is conceded to the ‘fair sex’.

“Proletarian women have a different attitude. They do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life. It is true that several

specific aspects of the contemporary system lie with double weight upon women, as it is also true that the conditions of hired labour sometimes turn working women into competitors and rivals to men. But in these unfavourable situations, the working class knows who is guilty.”

“The working woman is first and foremost a member of the working class.”



[Alexandra Kollontai, 1872-1952](#)

Kollontai’s magnificent approach is international, and proletarian. She is not writing of any particular country, but of all countries. In this writing, as in the writings of the ANC, the national, class and gender questions are understood together. The resolution of each is a condition for the resolution of the others. All must be solved together, before any of them can be fully solved.

~ * ~

Rosa Luxemburg said:

"Most of those bourgeois women who act like lionesses in the struggle against 'male prerogatives' would trot like docile lambs in the camp of conservative and clerical reaction if they had suffrage. Indeed, they would certainly be a good deal more reactionary than the male part of their class."



From *Red Rosa: A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg*, by Kate Evans

Further on in the same 1912 speech, Luxemburg says:

"We do not depend on the justice of the ruling classes, but solely on the revolutionary power of the working masses and on the course of social development which prepares the ground for this power. Thus, injustice by itself is certainly not an argument with which to overthrow reactionary institutions..."

"The current mass struggle for women's political rights is only an expression and a part of the proletariat's general struggle for liberation."

These three women, Zetkin, a German; Luxemburg, a Pole and a Jew; and Kollontai, a Russian; knew each other well. As comrades they stood together for organisation and for women's proletarian internationalism. They had nothing to say about patriarchy or gender. "Rights," for them, were a means to an end.

The International Women's Day that they founded was a Red Women's Day.

~ * ~

Rosa Luxemburg was tortured and murdered on 15 January 1919



Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919

Martyr for Proletarian Internationalism

~ * ~

Founding of International Women's Day

In agreement with the class-conscious, political and trade union organizations of the proletariat of their respective countries, the Socialist women of all countries will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be handled in conjunction with the entire women's question according to Socialist precepts.

The Women's Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully.

Clara Zetkin, Rathe Duncker and Comrades, August 27, 1910.

Above is the record, from *Die Gleichheit* Stuttgart, August 29, 1910, of the resolution passed at the Second International Women's Conference at Copenhagen, August 27, 1910, led by Clara Zetkin, establishing International Women's Day.

The next year, a million women in many locations demonstrated on various dates in February and March. After 1921 the date was fixed as 8 March.



Women demonstrating in Vienna, Austria, 19 March, 1911



1920s Soviet Posters for International Women's Day

The modern woman, wearing a red doek, leads another woman out of drudgery.



German Posters for International Women's Day, 1913 and 1932

Lenin, Maxeke, Charter and March



Nadezhda Krupskaya, b. 1869; Vladimir Lenin, b. 1870; Rosa Luxemburg, b. 1871; Alexandra Kollontai, b. 1872; **Charlotte Maxeke, b. 1874**. One generation.

If we do not draw women into public activity, into the militia, into political life; if we do not tear women away from the deadening atmosphere of household and kitchen; then it is impossible to secure real freedom, it is impossible even to build democracy, let alone socialism.

[Lenin, Third Letter from Afar, Zurich, March 1917](#)

“Let the liars and hypocrites, the dull-witted and blind, the bourgeois and their supporters hoodwink the people with talk about freedom in general, about equality in general, about democracy in general.

“We say to the workers and peasants: Tear the masks from the faces of these liars, open the eyes of these blind ones. Ask them:

“Equality between what sex and what other sex?

“Between what nation and what other nation?

“Between what class and what other class?

“Freedom from what yoke, or from the yoke of what class? Freedom for what class?

“Down with the liars who are talking of freedom and equality for all, while there is an oppressed sex, while there are oppressor classes, while there is private ownership of capital, of shares, while there are the well-fed with their surplus of bread who keep the hungry in bondage. Not freedom for all, not equality for all, but a fight against the oppressors and exploiters, the abolition of every possibility of oppression and exploitation-that is our slogan!

“Freedom and equality for the oppressed sex!

“Freedom and equality for the workers, for the toiling peasants!

“A fight against the oppressors, a fight against the capitalists, a fight against the profiteering kulaks!

“That is our fighting slogan, that is our proletarian truth, the truth of the struggle against capital, the truth which we flung in the face of the world of capital with its honeyed, hypocritical, pompous phrases about freedom and equality in general, about freedom and equality for all.”

Lenin, Soviet Power and the Status of Women, November 1919

The proletariat cannot achieve complete freedom, unless it achieves complete freedom for women.

Lenin, To the Working Women, February 1920



Nadezhda Krupskaya, Deputy Education Commissar, CC CPSU member, Supreme Soviet member, wife of V I Lenin, photographed in 1890:

“We should try to link our personal lives with the cause for which we struggle”



International Women's Day, 1930



International Women's Day, 1932

Women's Charter, South Africa, 17 April 1954:

"We women do not form a society separate from the men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress."

Freedom Charter, South Africa, 26 June 1955:

- *Only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief;*
- *Every man and woman shall have the right to vote for and to stand as a candidate for all bodies which make laws;*
- *The rights of the people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or sex;*
- *Men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work;*

Women's March to Union Buildings, 9 August 1956: First of National Women's Day

A Worker's Day



International Women's Day, 1928



Soviet International Women's Day Poster, 1930s



International Women's Day, 1914

International
Women's
Day
is a
Workers'
Day!